

Chinese Intellectual Traditions as Global Resources

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Highlights

- There has been little real progress in finding feasible approaches to addressing global knowledge asymmetries, especially in the social sciences and humanities.
- With China's new global role, how Chinese experiences could contribute to global theoretical construction in the human and social sciences becomes the order of the day?
- As the most valued resources for human, social, and cultural theorization, Chinese thought and experiences also serve as an effective catalytic agent for global intellectual pluralism.
- The great value of China's intellectual traditions in global theoretical construction fuels Chinese scholarship in the humanities and social sciences to win a reputation on the world stage.

Keywords

Chinese intellectual traditions, global knowledge asymmetries, intellectual pluralism, Michael Burawoy

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Scholars of the humanities and social sciences in both the West and the Rest have long criticized the location of non-Western material as objects to be examined according to the unidirectional

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epistemological framework that is Western in conception, orientation, and organization, yet to date there has been little real progress in finding feasible answers to the ambitious questions of how non-Western traditions can produce generally applicable social theory and how Western and non-Western social experiences can carry equal authoritative generality. With China's fast-growing role in the global economy and politics, an increasing number of thinkers of both Chinese and non-Chinese cultural backgrounds have seriously explored how Chinese experiences could serve global theoretical construction in the humanities and social sciences. These are questions of critical importance as Chinese social researchers engage more comprehensively and profoundly with the global community. They are critical also because only when China proves its value in global theoretical construction can Chinese scholarship in the humanities and social sciences win a reputation on the world stage.

In international and comparative studies in education, how to position what we study together with our own society and education has long been an important yet poorly theorized issue. This relates closely to the researcher's perspective and powerfully influences the conclusion he or she reaches. Personally, I have long been grappling with such a theme, especially over the past few years. When Professor Shuangye Chen approached me in May 2022 for a brief piece to contribute to *ECNU Review of Education*, I was re-reading Michael Burawoy's (2014) work on global knowledge asymmetries. What I was reading and pondering at the moment echoed very much what Professor Chen was asking for. Indeed, they were generally about the same issues. This is another piece of evidence that such urgent issues are on the mind of many contemporary scholars "scrambling to get their foot on the ladder at the lower rungs" (p. xiv). With her kind approval, my response to Professor Hongjie Chen's seminal work is partly based on some of my critiques of Burawoy. As one of the best sociological thinkers in the present world, Burawoy is acutely aware of the daunting challenges we are facing as both global citizens and students of contemporary humanities and social sciences. This, therefore, provides my response with strong relevance.

Global knowledge asymmetries (re)-considered

At the very beginning of the preface, Burawoy rightfully points out that humanity has become an endangered species by its own doing. With full recognition of the hierarchy of the global division of knowledge production, he then illustrates the challenging situation of the humanities and social sciences in the South. "The more social sciences of the South are drawn into the orbit of Northern journals, Northern research funds, Northern debates—and Southern powers tend to incentivize such participation—the more they may be drawn away from the issues most relevant to their local or national context" (p. xv). He understands sympathetically that in the South, public engagement has to be "the driving force behind the advance of the social sciences," and committed social

scientists require “academic knowledge that is relevant to their surroundings” instead of becoming “a shrinking appendage of Northern social science” (p. xv). Sharing an experience common to many others, he feels the contradiction between seeking to be responsive to issues in the South and trying to engage the paradigms of the North, caught in Hanafi’s (2011) polarity: publish locally and perish globally or publish globally and perish locally.

Often found typically among postcolonial scholars in both the North and the South, however, such sharp criticism is much flawed, especially epistemologically. With a highly binary mindset, it continues to divide the world dichotomously into two as if they are separated and could conveniently be addressed independently. Such a mode of thinking fails to see the real picture of the vast non-Western world as a mix of the traditional and the Western after European expansion for centuries. The reality is that the West has long had its profound impact on almost every aspect of most non-Western societies. What is urgently needed is to set the mix right. To do so, one is required to have a deep understanding of both the traditional and the Western at the same time in order to understand the social reality of today’s non-Western societies. The dichotomous mode of thinking is theoretically poorly based and practically misleading. It has portrayed a helpless and even hopeless picture with rigidity and passivity. Within such a scenario, what choices can non-Western (not accidentally also developing) societies make?

Burawoy does not fall completely into such a trap. He notices the cosmopolitan locals who are part of the elite in the South exploiting their connections with the North to advance their academic capital in the South, and, at the same time, represent the South in the North. As a powerful voice in semi-peripheral societies, with established scholarly traditions and accumulated resources, it is possible for them to engage with Northern knowledge in a constructively critical manner in order to “create an alternative pole in the global production of knowledge” (p. xvi). Citing Russia and China as examples, he reminds us that “Northern social science is often uncritically embraced or unreflectively rejected, but more rarely critically assessed or selectively appropriated” (p. xvi). While his warning remains highly relevant, it is fair to recognize the fact that many Chinese social researchers are fast becoming critical when engaging with Western scholars and theories.

In the face of all the complexity, Burawoy goes further to ask how to think of social science at a global level. He proposes “a conversation between perspectives that arise in different places at different times, a conversation that recognizes the hollowness of false universalities that generalize particular vantage points” (p. xvi). In order to have such a conversation, according to him, “there has to be a common social science language informed by a common set of values and concerns” (p. xvi). He suggests that we return to the challenges this planet faces and continue to draw on a sociological tradition that has provided an unabashed critique of utilitarianism and market supremacy as well as of rationalization and state domination (pp. xvi–xvii). It appears that Burawoy still sees the world through his largely Western eyes, and the sociological tradition he

is defending, almost exclusively Western, has repeatedly failed to understand the vast expanse of non-Western societies, let alone serve them effectively. Yet, we must note that Burawoy was writing a preface of a book that addresses global knowledge asymmetries with many good insights.

Finally, Burawoy also constructively proposes “a transnational perspective on the defense of civil society itself conceived as embedded in global interconnections” and “a new sociology and more broadly a social science that will address problems on a planetary scale” (p. xvii). He correctly points out that such sociological endeavors “must surely lie with a new generation of multilingual social scientists who knit together local, national, and global commitments, respectful of perspectives from different parts of the world, cognizant of the dangers of false universality as well as the very uneven playing field on which we operate” (p. xvii). The epistemological awareness Burawoy demonstrates in this brief preface is echoed and even better expressed by Sen’s (1999) recognition of plural cultural identities and his (2002) idea of “trans-positionality.” Sen rejects a single cultural standpoint and explores a trans-positional assessment, aiming to synthesize different views from distinct positions to avoid “methodological nationalism.”

Calling for global intellectual pluralism

Some researchers in comparative higher education have been calling for epistemic diversity. According to Marginson (2014, pp. 24, 29), “comparative education needs to identify the plurality of system models, to render transparent the possible analytical schemas and analyze each system from more than one vantage point.” “Given the different traditions, there is no point in imposing judgments on one system in terms of the norms of another, but worth exploring the potential for common ground.” However, how can we implement such a theoretical and epistemological position in practice? The “older comparative social science” that “sought to explain all societies in terms of Anglo-American or Western norms and trajectories that were seen as universally applicable” (Marginson & Yang, 2022, p. 3) is not only culturally biased but also heavily based on the dichotomous mode of thinking that underlies modern social sciences. While people have increasingly realized the necessity for multiple perspectives, few people can actually deliver it in research. As one of the most fundamental predicaments in contemporary social research, this explains why the existing notions of how the West and the non-West are constituted and how relations between Western and non-Western societies are still binary, even though such approaches are fast becoming intellectually inappropriate and practically misleading.

What world social science badly needs is to (re)orient to intellectual pluralism. As a matter of fact, calls for intellectual pluralism are increasingly loud and clear. With gathering human connectivity, there is a growing need for truly respecting and understanding “others” in order to avoid misunderstanding and clashes between civilizations, as warned by Huntington in the 1990s. However,

there is still a lack of understanding of how this could be implemented. In modern China, some extraordinary talented intellectuals, such as Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998) and Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005), have been able to traverse multiple intellectual traditions. What remains unclear is how they could achieve such success and how their experiences may inform and inspire more general educational practices. The theorization of such successful experiences would have significant implications for both scholars and practitioners in education. Having learned from the West for over a century with extraordinary success, together with their rich and long indigenous intellectual traditions, Chinese scholars are ideally placed to make such breakthroughs, searching for new approaches to educating students to be capable of navigating between different intellectual traditions, and by extension to respond to common global challenges.

Chinese scholars are also well equipped to do so by the globalization that has expanded connections and narrowed distances between cultural, ethnic, and social groups. Today's unprecedented human connectivity demands an ever-greater inclusion of global thought traditions to stand not only as the objects of academic inquiry but also as its generative structure and vocabulary. In such a deeply interconnected, multipolar world, the rigorous self-explanations of ethnic groups other than Anglo-Europeans should have their place in structuring legitimate social inquiry. The human sciences then differ from the natural sciences by seeking to clarify the self-explanations of social actors and articulate the norms that are essential to those explanations, instead of discovering natural causal laws (Taylor, 1985). Against this backdrop, Chinese intellectual traditions constitute great resources to contribute to global theoretical construction. An urgent task for Chinese researchers is to explore how, and under what conditions, China's indigenous traditions of thought can serve to inspire and structure more generally applicable social and political theory. They ask how to transform Chinese theories and experiences from “local knowledge” to “universal knowledge” and how the distinct experiences motivating the production of new knowledge for and within particular Chinese locales might be re-inscribed with more general significance (Jenco, 2016, pp. 1–2).

Going beyond simply pointing out how “Western” universality can be self-reflexively interrogated, such scholarly endeavors aim to produce rigorous contributions to existing work in the humanities and the social sciences. Interrogating rather than assuming the conditions under which particular forms of Chinese knowledge, values, or ideas come to be seen as useful or relevant, they accord Chinese experiences more authoritative generality, as embodying more widely generalizable insight. They explore the conditions under which knowledge might become applicable to other contexts beyond those that produced it and the ways in which Chinese thought may offer alternative, disciplinary homes to shelter new ways of thinking. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities are urged to ask how people might learn from intellectual heritages that track local concerns even as they promise wider applicability. Such efforts have great significance

because, in the modern era, theory has traveled almost exclusively unidirectionally from the West to the Rest. The challenge for a contemporary scholarship is how to reverse such a movement (Jenco, 2016). In this sense, Chinese intellectual traditions belong not only to China. As valuable resources, they have the great potential to contribute to global theoretical construction.

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